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ABSTRACT

There have been two traditions of outdoor education in Great Britain. Field studies focus on science, while outdoor pursuits focus on physical skills and technical knowledge or personal and social development through challenging situations. These two approaches have much in common and much to offer each other. Although both approaches use the environment as the medium for learning, there is little evidence that they encourage a greater awareness and concern for the environment. Metropolitan Wigan (England) owns two residential outdoor education centers that have developed a broader approach to education and emphasize the environment. It is their policy that personal, social, and environmental aspects of outdoor education are inseparable and that raising confidence and self-esteem is essential for environmental education. They have offered writing, art, photography, geography, geology, biology, drama, dance, music, and mathematics courses as well as the more usual courses in outdoor and environmental activities. The centers maintain a friendly and supportive learning environment and utilize a student-centered, experiential approach to learning. Urban students aged 9-18 attend 5-day residential courses in outdoor and environmental education linked to their school curriculum. Separate programs for elementary and secondary students include all elements from awareness through action. Contact between the centers and schools is encouraged through teachers' inservice courses and workshops. Links with local communities and organizations are maintained through farm visits and service learning conservation projects. The centers have worked with other European countries on models for environmental education and have hosted international youth events. (TD)

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Changing Roles for Outdoor Education Centres

by
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RC 023877

Geoff Cooper

Changing Roles for Outdoor Education Centres

Introduction

Britain has the most extensive system of outdoor education centres in the world. There are over 1,200 day and residential centres provided by local authorities, voluntary and commercial organisations. It is estimated that 2-3 million young people take part each year in a vast range of outdoor education programmes. There have been two traditions of outdoor education in Britain, one through field studies and the other through outdoor pursuits. During the last 50 years they have developed as quite distinctive movements with their own philosophies.

The early development of field studies was linked to the study of science, particularly biology, geography and geology. Fieldwork has been closely related to school and college curricula. The Field Studies Council was founded in 1943 and has continued to establish a range of centres throughout England and Wales. In the early years courses were designed primarily for sixth formers (16-18 year olds) but there are now opportunities for adults and younger students to study outdoors. Since the 1960s many local education authorities have opened field study centres where school children can learn about and through the environment. Urban study centres, which often involve young people in studies of their own local environments, are a more recent development.

Drasdo (1972) distinguishes two approaches in the teaching of outdoor pursuits. The first concentrates on the development of physical skills and technical knowledge and was promoted by the centres run by the Councils of Physical Recreation. The second approach uses challenging situations in the outdoors to develop personal qualities such as self-reliance and leadership. This latter approach was influenced by the Outward Bound movement which established its first centre in Britain during the 1940s. It can be argued that there is a third approach which is represented by local authority and voluntary outdoor centres established since the 1960s. Their programmes have been designed primarily to encourage both personal and social development. Most outdoor leaders today consider the development of these personal and social skills to be the focus of their work.

Arguably, outdoor centres have suffered by the division into field studies and outdoor pursuits. Field study centres have been regarded as more academic and their work linked more closely to the schools curricula. Leaders in these centres are usually referred to as teachers or tutors which reinforces this role. Outdoor pursuits centres have had more problems in justifying their

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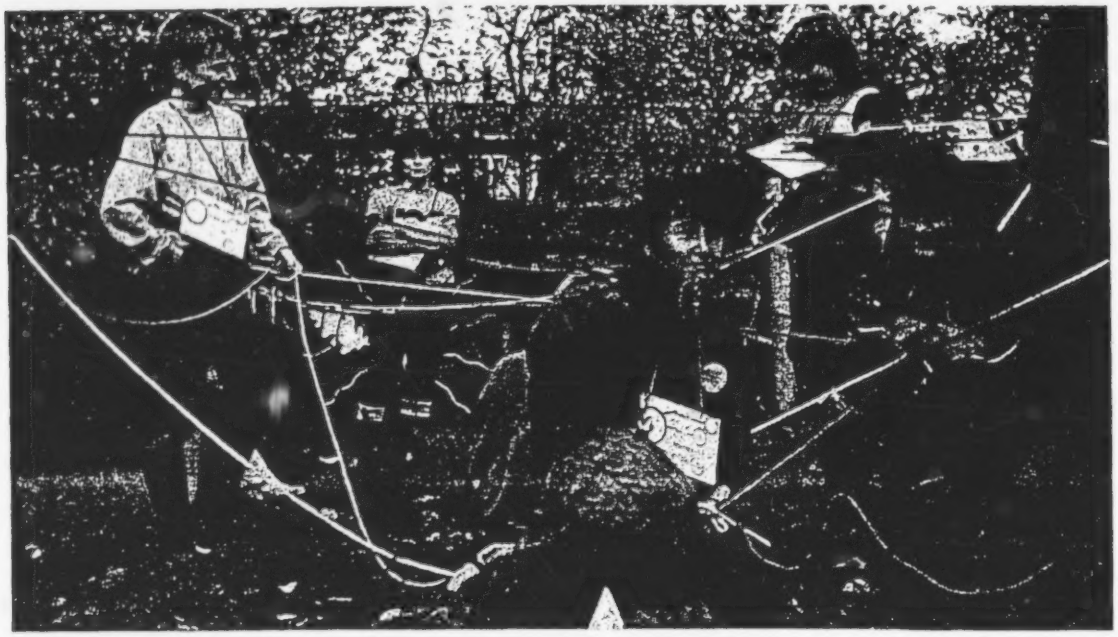
existence partly because the activities they offer are frequently perceived to be associated with leisure and recreation rather than education. This problem can be exacerbated when their 'leaders' are often called instructors rather than teachers, which implies that they are imparting technical skills rather than educating young people.

In reality these two approaches have much in common and each has a great deal to offer the other. There are many social benefits to be gained from visits to these centres. Young people taking part in fieldwork or outdoor activities need to communicate and co-operate effectively. Learning is experiential and involves group discussions and decision making. Adventurous activities as part of a field studies programme can help to motivate and inspire individuals and strengthen groups whereas fieldwork can help in the understanding of natural and human systems.

The potential for encouraging environmental education through programmes at these centres is enormous and yet their influence on raising awareness in this area has been limited. The environment is used to provide a back cloth for academic learning and a means of developing personal and social skills. There is learning about and through the environment but little attention has been given to education for the environment. Each year in Britain thousands of young people are introduced to new and challenging environments through visits to outdoor centres. They may return more knowledgeable about a particular environment, wiser and more sociable and perhaps with new interests but are they any closer to the world around them? There is little evidence to suggest that outdoor centres are encouraging a greater awareness and concern for the environment (Cooper,1991). To achieve this they may need to re-assess their aims, programmes and methods. The following case study considers how two local authority outdoor education centres have tried to develop a broader approach to education and one which places greater emphasis on the environment.

Lakeland Outdoor Education Centres- a case study

Since the early 1980's Metropolitan Wigan has owned two residential outdoor education centres, Hinning House and Low Bank Ground, in the Lake District. The centres are jointly managed as Lakeland Outdoor Education Centres and their programmes co-ordinated and run by a team of six teachers. Young people aged nine to eighteen years from urban areas come to the centres for five day residential courses in outdoor and environmental education linked to their school curriculum. Primary groups (9-11 years) can choose between two programmes, "Earthkeepers" and "Explorers", and older students take part in a variety of programmes involving outdoor adventure, problem solving, art, fieldwork and practical conservation. The centres also run in-service courses for teachers and youth leaders and training courses for countryside staff and environmental leaders.



From the start the centres have attempted to relate their work to mainstream education in Wigan and the staff have adopted a broad and a balanced approach in their teaching. They were never conceived as narrow-based outdoor pursuits or field study centres but as education centres where all kinds of school and college groups could learn from the environment. Over the years the centres have hosted writers' workshops, art, photography, geography, geology and biology courses, drama and dance, music and mathematics groups as well as the more usual courses in outdoor and environmental activities.

There is a written education policy for the centres that all groups receive prior to their visit. The aims of the centres are expressed in terms of awareness, understanding and caring for oneself, others and the environment. This is not a new concept (Dartington Amenity Research Trust, 1980; Mortlock, 1984) but there is a belief that personal, social and environmental aspects are inseparable and all part of the same process. A person who has little self-respect or self-esteem is unlikely to work well in a group or to have respect for the environment. It follows that the work of the centres in raising confidence and self-esteem is the essential foundation required for environmental education. Surveys of teachers and young people visiting the centres over a number of years provide useful anecdotal evidence of the educational value of the centres (Cooper, 1997).

The two centres have developed a particular ethos, which can be illustrated by considering a number of key areas:

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1. Teaching and Learning

There is a strong belief in the importance of creating a friendly and supportive learning environment. All aspects of the centres contribute to this- the buildings, decor, accommodation, food, management and attitude of all the staff. Linked to this is a student-centred approach to learning with high expectations for personal involvement and teamwork. Young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning and emphasis is placed on co-operation rather than competition. As in other outdoor centres participants learn through direct experience and the value of planning, doing and reviewing is stressed.

The centres are concerned with the development of the whole person through mind, body and spirit. A written set of learning outcomes is sent to visiting schools and these relate to the centres' aims of personal, social and environmental education. The learning outcomes are defined in terms of skills, attitudes and knowledge (Figure 1). A range of outdoor activities is offered and selected according to the potential each has for meeting the

● = MOST POTENTIAL EDUCATIONAL POTENTIAL OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION ACTIVITIES ○ = SOME POTENTIAL

LEARNING OUTCOMES	ORIENT	KAYAK	MT WALK	SCULP WALK	EARTH WALK	TEAM CHALL.	LOCAL WALK	FARM VISIT	ROCK SCAMBLE	BIKING	CENTRE LIFE / RESIDENCE
SKILLS											
Organisational		●	●							○	●
Self-reliance	●	●	●		○				●		●
Co-operation	●	●	●	○	●	●			●	○	●
Communication (listening, expr. ideas	●			●	●	●		●	●		●
Assertiveness						●					●
Taking responsibility	●	○	○			●	●		●	○	●
Problem solving	●					●					○
Creative/imagination				●	●	●					
Observation	●	○	●	●	●		●	●	●	○	
Recording			○	○	○			○			
Map reading	●		○	○							
Analysis/review	●	●	●			●		●	●	●	●
Physical skills		●	●			●			●	●	
Taking action											●
ATTITUDES											
Self-awareness/respect	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●	●	●
Positive Attitudes	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Awareness of others/empathy	●	○	●			●	●	●	●	●	●
Trust building	○	●				●	●		●		○
Aesthetic appreciation		○	●	●	●		●		●		
Environmental awareness		○	●	●	●		●	●	●	○	
Respect for Environment	●	○	●	●	●				●		
KNOWLEDGE											
Basic Physiology	●	●	●						●		
Safe Practice	●	●	●	○	○	●	○	●	●	●	●
Healthy Lifestyle			○								●
Understanding landscapes			●	●			●	●	○		
National Park			●				●	●	○		
Energy flow			○	○			○				
inter-relationships			○	○	●		○	○	○		
Recycling			○	●			○				
Water cycle		○	●				○		●		
Geological time			●				○		○		
Weather		●	●				●	●	○		
Contrasting land use/ settlement			●	●			●	●	●		
Environmental pressures			●	○			●	●	●	○	
Access/conservation	●	○	●	●			●	●	●	●	
Opportunities to follow up interests			●	●						●	●

Figure 1

desired learning outcomes. In this way, activities are not treated as an end in themselves but as a vehicle for learning. Using this approach raises questions about the appropriateness of some activities to the aims of the centres. For example, it could be argued that abseiling, which places the

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leader in a dominant role and emphasises reliance on equipment and a quick thrill may actually work against the overall philosophy. Care should be taken with this approach as the educational potential lies not in the activity per se but in the way it is introduced and facilitated by the leader (Cooper, 1998: 133).

2. Schools and Community Links

The Lakeland Outdoor Education Centres attempt to maintain strong links with Metropolitan Wigan and its schools. The work of the centres, by encouraging motivation and developing skills and knowledge through first hand experience, relates closely to the education authority's aims to raise standards and improve the quality of teaching and learning. The importance of these enriching experiences has been recognised by the Department for Education and Employment (1998).

Contact between the centres and schools is encouraged through teachers' in-service courses and workshops. There have been recent links with the advisory service to develop educational materials relating to a range of curriculum areas including geography, physical education, science, technology, art and literacy. For four years there was an artist based at the centres as part of an extensive Wigan based "Artists in Schools" project. Each visiting group had the opportunity to work with the artist as part of their programme. The centres are also involved in Local Agenda 21 initiatives to promote sustainable practice in schools and centres. A young persons' Local Agenda 21 group has been established in Wigan and it has held weekends at Hinning House and Low Bank Ground working on practical conservation projects.

There are good links with local communities and organisations. Farm visits that help to promote understanding in a close-knit community are an established feature of Hinning House. A national training course for countryside staff held each year at Low Bank Ground involves a group of some sixteen rangers working with children in a local primary school. This same school has developed several links with Wigan schools and visits have been arranged and information exchanged. Over the years the centres have developed joint projects with a wide range of local organisations including the Lake District National Park, National Trust, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Cumbria Wildlife Trust, Forest Enterprise and the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group. This co-operation has involved training workshops, practical conservation projects and ideas for promoting good environmental practice.

3. International Links

As part of an outward-looking policy the centres have developed many international links and continue to receive visitors from other countries. In

1990 Low Bank Ground hosted an East-West European conference on environmental education. This was a landmark as political barriers between eastern and western Europe had just collapsed. It led to several joint projects including the dissemination of a model for environmental education developed and trialled in five European countries (Den and Cooper 1993). Since 1994 the centre has organised regular international youth events for 18-25 year olds on environmental themes such as, 'Community, Arts and the Environment', 'Tourism and the Environment' and 'Local Agenda 21'. These events have been funded by the European Union's 'Youth for Europe' programme and supported by the British Council's Youth Exchange Centre. Each year the participants have produced their own report of the event. The centre has also arranged training for European youth leaders and has been involved in setting up international summer camps in several countries. Centre staff and young people from Wigan have taken part in these events.

4. Environmental Understanding and Practice

The centres have a written policy on environmental education which includes all elements from awareness and understanding through to action. The 'Explorers' primary school course introduces young people to a variety of environments through outdoor activities, for example, 'in the forest(orienteering), 'on the lake' (canoeing), 'in the gill' (rock scrambling), 'down to earth' (environmental awareness activities). Sometimes it is the approach adopted by the leader rather than the nature of the activities that is important. A mountain walk becomes an exploration, a journey into the mountains rather than a dash to the top. There is time to experience detail- a rock, a tree, a bone, a view- and connect with the spirit of the place (Cooper, 1998: 99-102). The mountain walk is used to fire imaginations, introduce environmental issues and allow time for reflection. The centres also offer the 'Earthkeepers' programme as an alternative for primary groups. This is a carefully structured programme devised by the Institute of Earth Education (Van Matre and Johnson, 1988). The young people are invited to take part in a quest to find the secrets of becoming an 'Earthkeeper'. The programme starts and finishes in their school and it involves them changing their own environmental behaviour.

The centres have also tried to improve on their own environmental practice by reducing the use of transport with groups, saving on packaging and the use of paper, composting and recycling. The grounds at Low Bank Ground have been managed to improve habitats for wildlife by tree and hedge planting, protecting the lakeshore from erosion and overgrazing and creating a wetland area. The centres are currently involved, with six other British centres, in an Eco-centres pilot project (Tidy Britain Group, 1999).

Concluding comments

I have tried to argue that there is a need for outdoor centres to reconsider their roles. I believe they should become more a part of mainstream education by developing links across the curriculum. Their groups will benefit from a more open and outward-looking policy where centres become involved in their local communities and co-operate with a range of other organisations. This case study has illustrated some of the successes of two centres in meeting this challenge. There have, of course, been problems and setbacks, some of which have resulted from structures and working practices imposed from outside. There is little doubt, however that outdoor centres can do much more in the UK to encourage environmental education and help prepare young people for life in the 21st century.

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